

+Starting your Literary Analysis Essay

This type of essay requires you to carefully and closely examine a work of literature in order to answer a question of significance. This question may relate to the work's theme, characterization, imagery, tone, attitude, or something else.

Where should you begin?

- (1) Closely read the work under consideration. Mark words, phrases, elements of punctuation, or descriptions that strike you as noteworthy. Things to look for include: repetition of words or ideas, words that seem out of place or unusual, or images that create a clear and striking picture in your mind.

Take a look at this passage from *Their Eyes were Watching God*:

Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them.

She bathed and put on a fresh dress and head kerchief and went on to the store before Jody had time to send for her. That was a bow to the outside of things.

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- a. What words, phrases, images, and descriptions stand out to you as a reader?
 - b. What patterns and relationships do you see emerging?
 - c. What is the dominant emotion in the paragraph? What is the cause of this emotion?
 - d. What does the passage reveal about the characters being described?

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Look back over what you highlighted: Do you see patterns or relationships emerging? Do ideas start to rise above others as being important and dominating in the passage?

- What words, phrases, images, and descriptions stand out to you as a reader? See underlining
- What patterns and relationships do you see emerging?
 - Separation between the inside and outside of herself (“shelf inside,” “went inside to see what it was”)
 - Joe does not embody her love dream—he is a poor substitute (“something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over”)
 - Flowers and blooms of youth are packed deep inside of her (“things packed up and put away”)
- What is the dominant emotion in the paragraph? What is the cause of this emotion?
 - Emptiness
 - Hope for the future
 - Restraint
- What does the passage reveal about the characters being described?
 - She is still alive and wants love—but she cannot show that to Joe
 - This relationship has required her to develop an exterior that does not match her internal thoughts, hopes, and dreams

- (2) Let the analysis begin! Once you have chosen your diction, imagery, and other elements of language to highlight in your essay AND have developed a set of working claims about their meaning, you are ready to start analyzing the language in greater depth and putting it into paragraph form.

TRY THESE....

Ex. "She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was."

Choose the richest commentary:

- a. Hurston reveals Janie's difficulty with her husband throughout this passage.
- b. Hurston's description of Janie in such unique language emphasizes that Janie is keeping something very important hidden away from her husband and others around her. Janie's actions show that she has detached herself from her own feelings and dreams of love.
- c. Hurston describes Janie's loss of love with a unique image: "something fell off the shelf inside her." By choosing to depict her internal thoughts as a "shelf inside her," Hurston shows us just how separated from her true emotions Janie has become.

Ex. "Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them."

Choose the richest commentary:

- a. By calling Janie's emotions "things," Hurston emphasizes how far removed Janie is from feeling real emotions for her husband or for anything at all.
- b. Hurston's word choice of "things" to denote Janie's emotions underscores how detached Janie has become from her emotions.
- c. In this passage, Hurston reveals that Janie is incapable of feeling real emotion anymore.

Ex. "That was a bow to the outside of things."

- a. Hurston's image of the "bow" emphasizes that Janie "puts on a fresh dress and a head kerchief" not as a usual dressing routine but as a significant act of decorating and presenting herself, as one would a package, to the world outside.
- b. Through the "bow," Hurston illustrates that Janie presents a dressed up and polished version of herself to the outside world.
- c. Hurston shows that Janie is very careful and calculated about how she presents herself to the community.